

The Cambridge Cast Gallery

Nigel Spivey

'Get rid of them'. In the twentieth century, that was how many people felt about plaster casts of Classical sculpture. What place was there, in a museum, for such pale replicas of antique mastery? And in the schoolrooms of fine art they were under attack too. What honour should be reserved for these dusty exemplars of the figurative canon? Why make students learn to draw from some hollow old Apollo? Why make students learn to draw at all? And so, in institutions across the world, much plaster-cast statuary was dragged into basements or simply destroyed. In Britain, one of the few collections to survive this modernist hostility was the Museum of Classical Archaeology, housed as it was within a solid refuge from fashion and change – the University of Cambridge. But it is a telling sign of what happened elsewhere that a significant number of visitors to the Cambridge cast gallery these days are pilgrims with pencils and drawing-boards. They have come to practice the same lessons as Rubens, Cezanne and so many artistic apprentices before them: studies around the muscular landscapes of a Grecian torso. There is nothing like that discipline.

A cast of millions

'A large and valuable collection of Original Casts from the Antique'. The record of a substantial donation made during 1850 to the newly-established Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge – a gift that included some monumental pieces, such as the massive Hercules Farnese – carries a phrase which may seem paradoxical. What might constitute an 'original cast'? In fact the term technically implies a copy made direct from its model, not taken at second remove from yet another copy. But beyond the contradiction in terms lie a couple of curious truths about Classical sculpture and our knowledge of it. In the first place, most so-called 'Greek statues' are not Greek statues, but rather Roman copies or adaptations, in marble, of Greek bronzes lost since at least the Byzantine period. Any figure with an incongruous palm-tree support or suchlike is likely to belong to this process of Roman homage to Greece handiwork: dense and brittle stone needs unsightly props in places where thin-walled bronze never did.

Secondly, such original Greek sculpture as survives does not appear to us now as it once did. For the Greeks invariably gave their three-dimensional art a coat of paint. In the case of a nude athlete, such over-painting might amount to nothing more than a head of blond hair, and a wash of sleek brown over the body. But there is little doubt that naked marble and raw bronze were offences to Classical taste.

Don't fake it, baby

So it is not only an assemblage of copies that occupies a glass-roofed gallery above Cambridge University's Faculty of Classics. The heart of the collection is made up of Victorian copies of Roman copies of famous works of art that can never be seen – for example, Myron's 'Discobolus', or the 'Spear-carrier' by Polyclitus. Many of the exhibits are irreplaceable, since making 'original casts' is rarely permitted nowadays. And where Greek 'originals' do exist, it happens that some of their Cambridge copies are arguably more 'authentic' than the originals themselves. For a start, they might be in a better state of preservation: this is true of certain sections of the Parthenon Frieze, cast prior to modern deterioration of the prototypes.

Many others, of course, look more as they once did in antiquity because of plastic surgery to missing parts. But others still have been even more strikingly restored to former appearance. It was a Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge, the late Robert Cook, who undertook to cover two plaster casts in the rich colours that once adorned them – the figures of the archaic 'Auxerre goddess' (original in the Louvre, Paris) and the 'Peplos maiden' (from the Akropolis Museum, Athens). These may seem like gaudy intruders upon an austere gathering of spectral shapes, but in terms of historical accuracy, all the other casts are the odd ones out.

The Marxist critic Walter Benjamin famously insisted that what art lost by the process of mechanical reproduction was its 'aura of enchantment'. Works of Greek sculpture, intended for display in sanctuaries not museums, and designed to inspire as much religious reverence as aesthetic esteem, have lost their enchantment not by being reproduced, but by being wrenched away from the temples and shrines they were always meant to decorate. Accepting that loss, any debate about the contrasting values of an 'original' and its 'copy' becomes rather pointless. In Cambridge, the cast collection of over 600 items was housed in a dedicated space of its own in 1884, but only formally divorced from the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1911. There were furious squabbles then regarding the inferiority (or not) of casts as opposed to 'the real thing'. At the launch of the special cast gallery in 1884, high Victorian maestros of the Neo-Classical mode (Poynter, Leighton, Alma Tadema) came to raise their glasses to a showcase of exemplary objets d'art – so many mannequins of formal perfection. In fact the abiding strength of the collection is owed to the more academic requirements of the Fitzwilliam director Sidney Colvin, who commissioned numerous casts for the purpose of illustrating his lectures to undergraduates.

Art in heaven

Thanks to Colvin, acquisitions were made of casts taken from important new discoveries almost within days of their excavation: the great pedimental sculptures from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, for example. Beholders of copy and original alike remain deprived of seeing these statues on a ledge some forty feet high, in gleaming polychrome, and presiding over an ambience of smoking incense, shrieking animals and chanted hymns. But the essentials of divine representation as the Greeks conceived it are there for us to see. Scale, form and spatial relationships were all highly significant in such sculptural groups. None of these factors is lost with the casts.

The fact remains that the Cambridge cast gallery is never more animated than when hosting troops of primary schoolchildren, hunting 'keystage Greeks' with their clipboards and worksheets. Usually it is a bourn of tranquillity, whose breezeblock walls make a satisfactory match for yellowing plaster. The course of the display is chronological, taking the visitor from the earliest taut colossoi of Greek heroic nudity through to a disembodied cohort of scowling Romans. Information is minimal, as it should be: for ghostly quiet as they seem, these are things that speak for themselves. When Frederick Leighton saw them freshly marshalled in 1884, he reassured the dons of Cambridge that 'art in her noblest form' had at last come into permanent residence within the university's 'venerable walls'. No one today would

risk claiming that plaster replicas of Classical sculpture furnish us with the noblest form of art. But all art is a form of imitation. The casts at Cambridge do not pretend to be anything else. Their sheer clustered quantity is eloquent enough. They offer those who visit them the most direct experience of an ancient culture that was, in the words of St Paul, 'a forest of images'.

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For all this, and more, on the Cambridge Cast Gallery see Mary Beard's article in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 1993.

You can find the Cambridge Cast Gallery at

<http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/ark.html>